Nursing Students on the Unit
Staff Nurses’ Role in the Clinical Practice Setting

As a clinical practice instructor, I supervised undergraduate students in their first facility-based experience in a nursing home. As such, I informed the staff nurse that students would be on the unit for 2 days per week for the next 12 weeks. Her response was mixed: “Nice to know…. What do I do with them?”

We initially talked about the clinical practice setting being a significant learning environment for undergraduate nursing students. Supervision of a nursing student is usually provided by an instructor or RN in this setting. The learning that occurs in this environment presents challenges that may cause students to experience stress and anxiety (Moscari-tolo, 2009; O’Mara, McDonald, Gillespie, Brown, & Miles, 2014). This duress is accentuated for some students, especially when it is their first exposure to older adults with complex health care and nursing needs.

Staff–student relationships are an important influence on students’ clinical practice learning (Dimitriadou, Papastavrou, Efstathiou, & Theodorou, 2015; Reeve, Shumaker, Yearwood, Crowell, & Riley, 2013). Students’ capacity to learn, self-confidence, and willingness to question observed nursing clinical practices are influenced by the extent to which they experience belongingness on a nursing unit (Levett-Jones, Lathlean, Higgins, & McMillan, 2009). Staff nurses’ beliefs about older adults, students, and the characteristics of an ideal clinical practice environment influence student learning.

Our conversation returned to her question, “What do I do with them?” The well-being of older adults is of paramount importance, meaning that staff nurses must be aware of the level of students (i.e., program [e.g., BSN, LPN] and placement [e.g., first year, senior course]) who are coming onto the unit and be familiar with the clinical practice instruc-
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provided by nursing students.

There are numerous strategies that staff nurses can initiate to help students feel comfortable on the unit. Introducing oneself to the students is a good start. Students are eager to hear from experienced nurses and learn tips that might enable them to provide quality nursing care to older adults. It is important to share knowledge about older adults in general and the students’ older patient (resident) assignments in particular. For example, “Mrs. Smith likes her tea with sugar,” or “Mr. Whating likes to use the toilet before going to physiotherapy.” Sharing enables students to provide the individualized care that they have discussed in theory that is so important in gerontological nursing practice. Staff nurses can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and clinical practice.

Another important strategy is using appropriate language during report. Terms such as “depressing” or “manipulative” will influence students’ attitudes, as will such terms as “rich in stories” or “used to be a nurse.” Introducing the older adult’s family to a student encourages conversations between them. These strategies will help students learn about older adults and provide opportunities to discuss gerontological nursing as a specialty area of practice.

Students who enter nursing come into their chosen career with expectations about how a professional nurse should behave. These expectations are a combination of their personal experiences, the media, anecdotes from family and friends, and their “paragon” of a nurse. Staff nurses are role models, helping students gain an understanding of the realities and responsibilities of nursing clinical practice.

There is often an “invisibility” in how staff nurses manage the work required during a shift. Proficient staff nurses internalize learned mental processes and behavior patterns so that perceptual overload is prevented and one is able to focus attention on actual situational priorities. The challenge is to identify and articulate the “hidden” features of staff nurses’ roles so that they are visible and more easily acknowledged by students. Students learn through their conversations with staff nurses.

Staff nurses can initiate information giving and assisting understanding of the needs of older adults with students. Nursing is situational and much of the knowledge needed for quality care of older adults arises from clinical practice itself. The ability to “read” a specific older adult situation while simultaneously monitoring related activities, interpreting subtle signs of physiological and psychosocial needs, and recognizing when and how to respond appropriately can only be constructed through repeated experience in the clinical practice setting.

Undergraduate nursing students’ clinical practice decision making is linear, based on limited knowledge and experience in the clinical practice setting, and is usually focused on simple tasks, especially early in their academic learning. With increasing experience caring for older adults, students will move from their understanding of and reliance on abstract theoretical concepts to the ability to view a clinical practice situation as a whole and within its context. Nursing students are responsible for requesting consultation or guidance from staff nurses when assistance with understanding and application is needed. The acquisition of clinical practice skills can be achieved more easily for students when a positive relationship exists with staff nurses on the unit.

If an appropriate learning intervention activity arises on the unit, the instructor or students should be informed. It is the students’ responsibility to be prepared for the opportunity. Staff nurses may be asked to supervise students. The clinical practice instructor supervising the nursing students will use his/her critical judgment to decide the level of supervision required based on the practice setting, needs of the older adult, level of risk involved should students perform the intervention, and students’ knowledge and skill base specific to the required intervention. Staff nurses voice agreement or
disagreement with this decision. Decisions about supervision must be made so that safe, competent, and ethical nursing is provided and the potential of harm to an older adult is minimized. Staff nurse members must only supervise those interventions that they are competent to provide and within their area of practice.

Staff nurses are professional role models and mentors for nursing students and this relationship is critical for students to acquire the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and clinical judgment needed to provide safe, competent, and ethical care as beginning RNs.

REFERENCES

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